

Nicol Hugh Baird (1796 - 1849)

Nicol Hugh Baird and his family resided in Cobourg for ten years, from 1835 into 1845. He was a civil engineer employed by the governments on Newcastle District projects, on the construction of the eastern part of the Trent-Severn canals. In 1835, he also made a survey for the location of the Cobourg-Peterborough Railway, and served on various other works. For this story, we will relate his involvement with the Cobourg harbor.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, August 26, 1796, he was the eldest son of Hugh Baird, a Scottish civil engineer. The father trained the son in the art and science of engineering practise. Between the years 1813 and 1820, the father, Hugh Baird, surveyed and drew up specifications for the Edinburgh and Glasgow Union Canal. This work involved bridges, docks, and structures of various kinds, in addition to earth works. Here the son received a thorough training from his father, and entered the profession in 1816. Before moving to Canada in 1828, Nicol H. Baird was employed for a term in Russia. In the year 1831, he was admitted as a life member of the Institute of Civil Engineers, of London, England.

Nicol's first work in Canada, was on the construction of the Rideau Canal, as clerk of the

works reporting to Lieutenant-Colonel John Bye, of the Royal Engineers. Nicol remained with the canal work until its completion in May, 1832. In the year 1833, at the request of the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, Baird was engaged to survey and make estimates of costs for opening navigation waters between the mouth of River Trent and the Rice Lake. In 1835, he was to advance his study from Rice Lake to Lake Simcoe.

In 1837, he was appointed engineer in charge of works in the Newcastle District.

It was on the 21st of September, 1831, when Nicol H. Baird married Mary Telfer White, of Montreal, the daughter of Andrew White, a prosperous contractor. To this union eight children were born, four boys and four girls. According to the Cobourg Star, at least three boys were born in Cobourg. The family resided in rented accommodation in the eastern part of the town. In June, 1845, the family returned to Montreal. Mrs. Baird died in Montreal on the 20th of August, 1847. Two years later in August 1849, Nicol Hugh Baird passed away at Brattleboro, Vermont.

James Gray Bethune, in his active years, was a big owner of harbour stock and the driving force behind developments. At the time of his bankruptcy in 1835, his holdings went to owners liv-

ing away from Cobourg. The Cobourg merchants thus lost control of the harbour company. The dues collected each year were substantial, but the main body of owners was only interested in collecting dividends. Repairs to the harbour were neglected. The rebellion years of 1837-1838 saw the money markets dry up. No funds were available.

In the year 1841, there was a revival of interest in the making of improvements to the Cobourg harbour. Finishing the necessary extension to western pier in order to retard the movement of sand into the basin by westerly storms, and dredging work were contemplated. The harbour company advertised for contractor to supply material and set in place six or more crabs. In the spring of 1842 preparations for this work were moving ahead.

The new Union Government of Canada, in 1841, established a department of public works. For reasons unknown, in the summer of 1842, the Cobourg Harbour Company made an assignment agreement with the new "board of works" to complete the harbour. The work involved pier construction and the dredging of the harbour basin. The estimate for these improvements was £4,200.

Nicol Hugh Baird has become quite familiar with the Cobourg harbour, its disrepair, the movement of sand into its basin, and

the improvements that were required. He understood the forces that were constantly moving sand, thus choking up the basin.

As district engineer, he was directed to study the harbour and to recommend improvements. He made a series of depth soundings and compared his measurements with earlier records. Baird came to the conclusion that the harbour basin be abandoned to shipping, that a new pier and breakwater be built from the then end of the last pier, easterly, to the rocky shore at D'Arcy Street.

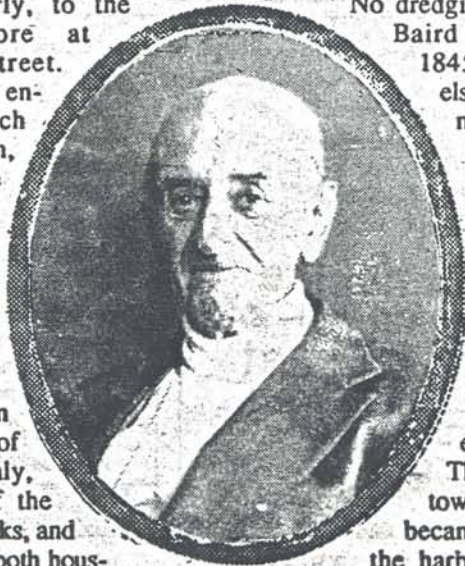
This would enclose a much larger basin, accommodate many more boats and the filling in of sand into the proposed basin would not occur.

A politician by the name of H. H. Killaly, president of the board of works, and reporting to both houses of the legislature, became involved with the Cobourg harbour and was the person to whom Baird finally reported. He was a dictator, a self-opinionated, arrogant, overbearing type of person. He ordered Baird to do as he was

told and he brushed aside Baird's plans for harbour improvements. A contractor was brought in to finish the pier additions. The Cobourg Harbour Company was cut off from all communications with the contractor. The extension to the west pier was completed and the contractor moved out to do other work at Whitby, taking with him much of the timber and other material that had been collected by the harbour company before the assignment was made.

No dredging was done. Baird resigned in 1845 and moved elsewhere. Indignation meeting by Cobourg merchants and local citizens could get nowhere with government officials. The final bill was twice the amount of the estimate.

Thus, when the town of Cobourg became owners of the harbour in 1850, they had to pay double the amount of over £10,000 to get possession.



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A-Baird family (183-02)